DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 914 FL 018 268

AUTHOR Donahue, Thomas S.
TITLE Age-Graded Themes in White American Middle-Class Slang: A Hypothesis.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Conference on the New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English and Other Languages (18th, Durham, NC, October 20-22, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Comparative Analysis; *Language Role; *Language Styles; *Middle Class; Sociolinguistics; Whites
IDENTIFIERS *Slang

ABSTRACT

It is proposed that middle- and upper-middle-class slang used among white young people in modern America shows age-related themes. For youngsters between the ages of eight and early adolescence, the major theme in slang use is to establish in-group and out-group membership, with standards of judgment based on clothes, manners, and physical appeal. From middle adolescence through the college years, the central theme is concerned with censuring bad judgment on the part of the individual. Slang usage during this time stigmatizes impulsive behavior and injudicious values in sex, drugs, and personal interests. In the period between a person's middle and late twenties, the major slang theme is in reinforcing responsible performance in one's career or on the job, through an emphasis in which thoughtfulness and dedication are praised. In general, slang is viewed as historicist, determinist, and materialist: when combined with a narrowly selective word-analytic cognitive style in the middle class, slang forms attitudes and emotional "gestalten" that transcend age-graded use and may influence an individual's pattern of thinking for his entire life. The theoretical background for this view is outlined, and evidence is presented. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED313914

Age-Graded Themes in White American Middle-Class Slang: an Hypothesis

Thomas S. Donahue
San Diego State University

In these remarks I will draw upon some of the current theoretical work in sociology to develop a background for a new hypothesis about the significance of slang usage in the lower-middle and upper-middle class (and in the vast area between) in modern American life. The hypothesis itself explores the role of age-graded language use in social and economic determinism, and it insists that poweful social forces inherent in language use shape our young people in ways that exist far outside the realm of our private, personal choices. Stated as briefly as possible, the hypothesis holds that middle and upper-middle class slang used among white young people in modern America shows **age-graded themes**. For youngsters between the age of eight and early adolescence, the major thematic character in slang use is to establish in-group and out-group membership, with standards of judgment based upon clothes, manners, and physical appeal. From middle adolescence through the college years, the central theme in slang concerns itself with censuring bad judgment on the part of the individual; slang usage during this time stigmatizes impulsive behavior and injudicious values in sex, drugs, and personal interests. In the period between a person's middle and late twenties, the major slang theme

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Donahue
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL018268

concerns itself with reinforcing responsible performance in one's career or on the job, through an emphasis in which thoughtfulness and dedication are praised. In general, slang must be viewed as historicist, determinist, and materialist; when combined with a narrowly selective word-analytic cognitive style in the middle class, slang forms attitudes and emotional Gestalten which transcend age-graded use and which may influence a person's patterns of thinking for one's entire life.

The theoretical background for this view derives from the current work of Jeffrey C. Alexander of the Department of Sociology at UCLA. Professor Alexander is among the leaders of a group of sociologists who are presenting a new synthesis of the theory of the past, with a critical re-evaluation of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber. Their new emphasis places only one mid-twentieth century analyst and theorist in the same rank as Weber: Talcott Parsons, with his extensive development of structural-functional principles. The area of primary investigation in the work of both Alexander and Parsons concerned itself with the question of **action**: what shapes it in individuals and in groups, what releases it, and in what ways can it be predicted? For our more restricted purposes, we need only posit the following structural-functional concepts. Any social structure shows "four primordial dimensions":

> the economic, concerned with maximizing efficiency and 'means'; the political, focused on organization and 'goals'; the solidary, representing direct emotional bonds and 'norms'; and the pattern-maintenance, oriented to stable symbolic patterns and 'values'

(Alexander 1988, p. 31).

Within these primordial dimensions, we may locate a "normative center of society that control[s] individualism by penetrating and socializing individual consciences" (1988:17). In that center, we find individuals who each can act with an amount of voluntarism, but who act from specific "emotions and moral sensibilities" (1988:24). Further, we must consider emotions and morality to be "the product of

> a lifetime of interaction, something in which the needs, wishes, and intentions of significant others have become synthesized and internalized to form a self (1988: 16).

We therefore infer that we must not treat slang as nonspecific cultural data, but instead as a socializing instrument which has its greatest impact in the formative years up through the age of 25. Slang, its implied values, and the circumstances of its use penetrate to the forming core of the individual, and may be crucial in the shaping of the self. One cannot be certain of the exact proportion between voluntarism (free will) and determinism in the shaping of a self, but it seems likely that slang weighs on the deterministic side of experience; slang expresses and reinforces the norms in the solidary dimension of social structure, and as we are about to see, in its recurrent and repeated themes it serves as a force for social pattern-maintenance.

The most mature formulation of Parson's theories on the structural-functional organization of society (and that favored by Alexander in his discussions) is found in his An Outline of the Social System (1961:30-79). Parson's analysis, as treated for our purposes, begins with the principle that all social structure develops from the outset various stabilizing tendencies toward balance (otherwise termed equilibrium or homeostasis) among its component parts. With structure as a prime, the stabilizing forces take the form of functions: there is a function of pattern maintenance in which individuals learn in an extremely slow and labored way the values of their social system, another function of goal-attainment, in which individuals develop a sense of purpose and political identity as they mature, yet another function of adaptation, in which individuals learn to cope with the economic system in their society, and a last function of integration, in which individuals learn the legal values in their society, and in addition are encouraged to learn ways of reifying and perpetuating those values. In all the four functions, individuals proceed through maturational sequence: they first learn roles in face-to-face interactions, they next learn the rules and values of small and larger collectivities (family, group, religion, social class), and then the norms for those types of behavior expected in their roles and collectivities, and finally the values developed for them as they participate in their specific roles and collectivities.

In this study of slang, I propose that slang themes reinforce the Parsonian functions in the following age-graded ways: the function of pattern maintenance, which is strong life-long, is at its strongest when it presents an implicational universe to youngsters from age eight through

thirteen. The function of goal-attainment begins at the age of thirteen and then joins in its influence with the function of adaptation through the college years. Then pattern-maintenance, goal-attainment, adaptation, and integration overlap one another beginning in a person's early twenties, and that overlapping influence shows particularly strong effect through the individual's third decade.

To show the functional role of slang in preserving social equilibrium, we will proceed with the following assumptions:

1. Slang reflects societal values, and the playful, brash, or impious style of its use may at times stem from a reluctance to speak in ponderous fashion of what are in fact the most serious and profound values of a society.

2. There exist certain discourse topics in which language users feel no hesitancy in expressing themselves in slang.

3. Such slang-appropriate topics may differ from one society to the next, or from one social class to another, but in all cases they admit of thematic analysis.

4. When given slang themes are repeated in different form from one generation to the next, they provide information about the **structure** of a given society.

5. When a large variety of slang terms reinforces the same thematic material from one generation to the next, we have an insight into the kind of **functional** principles which a society uses to sustain and maintain itself.

As we proceed with our investigation of these principles, let me re-introduce the hypothesis that slang themes in a given span of social classes show age-grading. In the age group from 8 to 13, the thematic emphasis middle-class American whites derogates youngsters who have less than average good looks, who are slower to mature, whose manners and clothing show no personal choices other than the vestigial tastes from the pre-adolescent lives of their own parents (and it is a sad time when the parents show derivation from a lower social class), and who are thus *nerds*. It is of interest to us to observe that for many generations in American life there has always been a word for "nerd." The Yiddish English from the 1890s has bequeathed to us a rich array of terms stigmatizing those individuals whose self-consciousness lapsed to the point that they looked bad before the gentile world, and these words have continued to enrich our capacity for vituperation even at this very hour: *kalyike, klutz, narr, nayfish, nemech, shlemiel, shlep, shlimazel, shlump, shmegegge, shmendrick, shmo, shnook, yold,* and *yutz*, among others (see the work of Leo Rosten for entertaining accounts). Pre-World War II youngsters, who as compared to modern youth were more acutely sensitive to a person's failure to apply intelligence to some task, accused each other of being dopes, boobs, goofs, goons, drips, and jerks (the latter term having been imported from later age-graded usage, where it referred, according to Wentworth and Flexner, to masturbaters.) There are those who retain a keen memory of semantic distinctions from those days, and who can offer disquisitions like the following:

> Unlike a sap, dope, boob, or jerk, a goof is tragically stupid on all

> subjects at all times, and his stupidity is not due to lack of experience or innocence and is never funny. (Wentworth and Flexner: 221)

Contrast the considerably less aggressive concept for "jerk":

> An ineffectual, foolish, or unknowingly dull youth or man, usually applied contemptuously to one who is overfamiliar, unprepossessing, eccentric, stupid, unreasonable, selfish, or carele.
>
> (Wentworth and Flexner: 289).

More recent terms for the unappealingly unprepossessing, those which had a considerable vogue in the 1950s, are: "gorp," "dip" (as in "you dipshit!"), "ding," "oofus," "loser," and, trending towards the 1960s, "turkey" and "flake" (in some places the later ameliorated to the point where it came to refer to those who were "cool" in a super-negligent way). Californian young people now in this early age-group apply the following terms to all offenders of the middle-class collective conscience: "nerd," "dweeb," "dork," "butt-head," "dope," "stooge," "lame-o," and "cretin." For those interested in the possible corollary that words change but meaning stays the same, I offer the following example: to Wentworth and Flexner's definition of "goof" (given above) a 14 year-old Californian I know supplied the precise modern equivalent: "*re*tard."

Thus the answer to the leading question "Why is there always a word for 'nerd'?" is not "Because there always has been an unfailing supply";

instead, we have to say that there has been an identified type which middle-class American youth in every recent generation has felt the need to derogate. The point is that there seems to develop under ordinary circumstances a societal need to establish in-groups and out-groups, and to label those who who are the social outcasts. The need to sort people into in-groups and out-groups is an American value which is coterminous with our Calvinistic heritage. The need to re-express that value in different words generation after generation is pattern-maintenance behaviour, and in Talcott Parsons' terms, this need actually functions as a closure strategy which provides stability to our social structure.

The first thing to be notice about the next age-graded span, from 14 through the early twenties, is that it continues to develop a more enriched array of terms for "nerd, " currently in Southern California including "barney," "bagger," "biff," "boofa," "dode," "duck," "fred," "gagger," "gimp," "goob," "hairball," "newt," "puderhead," "squid,", "subhuman," and "wuss" (see Munro, 1989). This group in addition favors a slang vocabulary which seems at first to reflect not so much sexual alertness, or awareness, or sophistication, but rather an amount of experience deriving from sexual detective work. In this age group very young people show a readiness to refer to each other by their genitalia. As one might expect, in modern times, such usages do not occur out of suppressed hilarity or sly good humor; for collection of terms used in such a sensibility, one has to go as far back as the 1890-1904 period in Farmer and Henley's Slang and Its Analogues (my favorites in that work are "penwiper" for the female part and "girlometer" for the male). In contrast, in current times as the slang users mature

toward their late teens and early twenties, the terms and the circumstances of their use become more viciously derogatory.

As we examine current usage, it will be helpful to distinguish between two levels of thematic analysis. At the outset, invective about sexual parts implies a kind of negligent foolishness or thoughtless and destructive impulsivity in male behavior (as in--"You: dork, prick, pork, dick!"--and so on.) Terms for the female part show a strong connotation of accusation and reproach, and are with implications of failure and betrayal (as in--"You cunt, twat, sleazy pussy!"--and so forth. Notice that we never hear "You penwiper, you!") I am sure, to pursue this further, that it has escaped no one's notice that if one wants to impute foolishness to a female, one brands her with the term for the male part, and one upbraids a male for failure or cowardice by labelling him with the female part.

At a more inclusive level of analysis, however, we see that invective about sexual parts has a more general thematic characteristic: a large portion of the slang in the age-graded use between 14 and 21 chastizes individuals for behaving with bad judgment. Consider the task of learning how to drink alcohol in a social way, and think of the labels since the 1950s which have been attached to the act of overdrinking and throwing up: "blow lunch," "heave cookies," "barf," "arc", "garf," "show a technicolor yawn," and "ralph" (at UCLA students now "boag," "boot,", "chew the cheese," "chum the fishes," "earl," 'yak," "zuke," and "bow to the porcelain god" [Munro, 1989]). There are dozens of terms for this humiliating act, with hardly a shred of preserved dignity implied in the lot. Terms

condemning bad judgment in sexual behavior, particularly as directed toward women, have abounded for centuries (we have spoken of queans, strumpets, trulls, and doxies for ages); one could not mature in the middle twentieth century without hearing of flooozies, sluts, tramps, and chippies, and the current generation speaks of "hanks," "skags," skeezes," "turbosluts," "hos," "wenches," "roadwhores," and (may Lord help them) "hose monsters." By comparison, a young man with similarly unfocussed judgment is known merely as a "player, " or, on occasion, as "Mr. Groin" (Munro:1989).

The question of the proper rational, or rationalized, behavior goes beyond the issues of drinking (or substance abuse) and sex to problems with personal stability and reliability. For generations, the generic term for an individual who has difficulty controlling his temper, or his tendency to violence, has been "asshole." Most recently, the following interesting differentiation has developed: a person who "does dangerous things, someone who (usually unintentionally) puts others in danger" is called a "Cujo" (Munro, 1989: 32).

It is of crucial importance for us to notice that in what is now alleged to be an era of greater liberty and license, young people are still stigmatizing the kind of behavior which would eventually place them outside of middle-class norms. Those whose ill-formed or raw values would make them unfit for future family life, or inadmissible to the basic social and economic unit, are given obnoxious labels. In the Parsonian sense, slang thus serves pattern-maintenance, goal-attainment, and adaptation functions.

In other words, certain major slang themes work to perpetuate the present social structure.

The last of the age-graded themes applies to people in their early and middle twenties, and encourages energy, thoughtfulness, and diligence in one's work life. The actual thematic content at this level has been repeated throughout this century; in contrast to the previous theme, there is little vocabulary innovation here but instead a borrowing of terms which have been around for generations. The proof that this theme occurs in the early and middle twenties consists of a demonstration by exclusion. College-age students simply do not talk to each other in these terms. Indeed, most people would be hard-pressed to name any nineteen-year-old to whom the following qualities or characteristics apply:

> moxie, push, punch, clout, steam, spunk, gumption, drive, get up and go, ball of fire, on the go, in full swing, a comer, nervy, come on like gangbusters, go-getter, play hard ball, play for keeps, hard sell, take charge, take the bull by the horns, hotshot, on the make, eager beaver, spark plug, self-starter, scrappy, spiky, go-go, snappy, zippy, full of piss and vinegar, full of beans, peppy, moving out . . . (from Lewin and Lewin 1988; synonyms for "industrious," "aggression," "ambitious," and "enterprising").

It seems to be part of our late-twentieth century collective wisdom that these are characteristics which most young people opt for only after they

leave college and begin their careers. In any event it is obvious that all of these terms, in the Parsonian perspective, reinforce social behaviors which are part of the functional adaptation to, and integration with, the economic and legal structure of our social system.

It is of interest to test this hypothesis on the Parsonian structural-functional character of slang by contrasting the language use in a social milieu quite different from that discussed so far. I will conclude with a discussion of slang used in an inner-city high school in San Diego. The high school draws from a neighborhood rife with problems from poverty, unemployment, social marginalization, drug use, and street gangs. Over ninety-eight per cent of the students at the high school are African-American. The area itself is geographically isolated, but near the warehousing and industrial section of town.

Given these facts, it will surprise some to hear that the most of the slang used by these young people shows the same themes, and the same structural-functional patterns, as those found in middle-class white groups. That is, slang themes have evolved in response to pattern-maintenance, goal-attainment, and adaptation pressures. People who look "nerdy" and foolish are said to be "trippin,'" "clownin,'" or "doggin'"; such a person is also known as an "ass-head," a "foolio," or a "foolish mortal." A person whose behavior offends the local standards of taste and judgment is said to be "illing" and someone who is, in the words of one student, "not worth your time" is "weak" or "bunk." A person who is clean-cut and appealing is "live" or "fresh" and can be called a "freak"; someone who is extraordinarily good-

looking is a "Gucci." To profess *savoir faire* is to show a talent for "chillin" or "kickin' it." Among unfavorable terms, one shows hostility or aggression by "dissing" someone (from disrespect). To lose control--as a result of bad judgment-is to invite the remark "that's scandalous" (defined, according to one student, as "that's messed up"). To be intrusively nosey is to be "dipping." To borrow something from a friend (in the hope that the friend will never discover the loss) is to "fish" it; to engage in petty theft among acquaintances is to "bite." Young or beginning users of crack are said to "get sick" or to be "sprung."

In short, this is a neighborhood which has been a victim of malign neglect; it is a place where people are driven to desperate acts to earn their "snaps" (money). In fact it is a place of such social exile that the police are known as "Babylons." Yet slang themes show that there is dominant nevertheless a strongly conventional middle-class like moral sense that is shared with the affluent white society many miles away.

Whether they are used in white or black groups, these select themes and the slang terms which express them thus serve a functional purpose in our society. It seems, in addition, that they correlate rigidly to middle-class social norms in such a way that the themes are constant throughout one's life even though the slang terms may change quite rapidly. The terms thus express and re-legitimate ideas which pre-exist in our society. In basic principle, in our social epistemology the middle class is more susceptible than other classes to an analytic cognitive style, a style in which meaning and truth are perceived as self-evident in the structure of words and

phrases. That is, members of the middle class (more than other people) learn about life by analyzing the language which they hear and read. If we presume that this is the case, slang, as it interprets and preserves functional norms, may to a certain measure form the middle class mind. Slang not only renews old attitudes; in its brash and profane forcefulness, it actually shapes and polices our present values in the light of old ones.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1983. The modern reconstruction of classical thought:
Talcott Parsons. Theoretical logic in sociology, Volume four. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

_____. 1988. Action and its environments. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chapman, Robert L. 1986. New dictionary of American slang. New York: Harper and Row. (An extensive revision of Wentworth and Flexner, below)

Dumas, Bethany K. and Jonathan Lighter. 1978. Is slang a word for linguists? American Speech 53.5-17.

Eble, Connie C. 1979. Slang, productivity, and semantic theory. Sixth LACUS
Forum, eds. William C. McCormack and Herbert J. Izzo. Pp. 215-227. Columbia, S.C.: Hornbeam Press.

_____. 1980. Slang, productivity, and semantic theory: a closer look. Seventh LACUS Forum, eds. James E. Copeland and Philip W. Davis. Pp. 271-275. Columbia, S.C.: Hornbeam Press.

_____. 1983. Slang: deviation or norm. Tenth LACUS Forum, eds. Pierre Martin and R. McCalla. Pp. 409-416. Columbia, S.C.: Hornbeam Press.

_____. 1985. Slang and cultural knowledge. Twelfth LACUS Forum, eds. Mary C. Marino and Luis A. Perez. Pp. 385-390. Columbia. S.C.: Hornbeam
Press.

Farmer, J. S., and W. E. Henley. 1970. Slang and its analogues. New York: the Arno Press.

Hasper, Randall. Lately of the San Diego Unified School District. A career professional who collected the student slang usage from his high school classes.

Lewin, Esther, and Alebert E. Lewin. 1988. The thesaurus of slang. New York: Facts on File Publications.

Milroy, Leslie. 1980. Language and social networks. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Munro, Pamela, ed. 1989. U.C.L.A. slang: a dictionary of slang words and expressions used at U.C.L.A. UCLA occasional papers in linguistics #8.

Parsons, Talcott. 1961. Theories of society. "An outline of social structure," 30-79. Glencoe: the Free Press.

Rosten, Leo. 1968. The Joys of Yiddish. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Wentworth, Harold B. and Stuart Berg Flexner. 1975. Dictionary of American Slang. 2nd ed. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.